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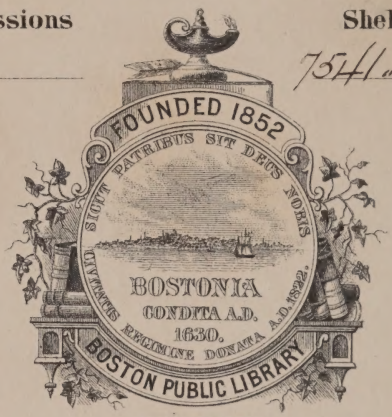

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Rev. W. E. Griffis

Dec. 6, 1892.

OPEN DOORS OF USEFULNESS

A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE

Shawmut Congregational Church

BOSTON, MASS.

ON SUNDAY MORNING, OCTOBER 30, 1892

BY

WILLIAM ELLIOT GRIFFIS

PASTOR AND TEACHER

Published by request of members of Shawmut Church

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BEACON PRESS: THOMAS TODD, PRINTER

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OPEN DOORS OF USEFULNESS.

"I KNOW thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name."

— *Rev. iii: 8.*

BOSTON, October 31, 1892.

REV. W. E. GRIFFIS, D.D.

Dear Sir: The undersigned earnestly request that you will permit the printing of your sermon, delivered Sunday, October 30, reviewing the history of Shawmut Church, and especially of your own pastorate.

Very respectfully,

CHAS. H. ALLEN,	S. C. WILKINS,
A. S. LOVETT,	WM. G. BENEDICT,
A. G. PERKINS,	F. A. FARRAR,
J. H. HOUGHTON,	FRANK WOOD,
CHAS. CARLETON COFFIN,	S. T. SNOW,
FRANK E. BUNDY,	A. L. KENNEDY,
M. F. DICKINSON, JR.,	D. E. PARTRIDGE,

FRANCIS S. ALLEN.

"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass."

THESE are the opening words descriptive of the contents of the last book in the Bible — the library of revelation. After the lapse of many centuries they are appropriate to this our hour and situation. In the life and history of Shawmut Church we are come to the parting of the ways. We can survey the past, for it is clear; but the future is in God's hands, and we trust him to show unto his servants "things which must shortly come to pass."

Of all the seven messages sent by the risen Lord to the churches of Asia through his servant John none, it seems to me, so accurately describes the situation of Shawmut Church as that to the angel of the church in Philadelphia. With the pitying tenderness, loving appreciation and faithful regard of the Jesus of the parables, and Friend and Master of the twelve, the past and the present are secure: "I know thy works;" that is, things done. It is the same Jesus who said "She hath done what she could" who speaks thus, and who adds: "Thou . . . hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name." It is the same glorified Jesus who said "Preach the gospel to every creature" that now declares: "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it;" and: "Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial. . . . Hold fast that which thou hast, that no man take thy crown."

With such a Master, such appreciation and promise, we, as pastor and people, can talk frankly and happily together about the past of our church and our mutual relationship, and face cheerfully the "things which must shortly come to pass."

In my sixth anniversary sermon (April 10, 1892), surveying the problem of the future of Shawmut Church, I stated my belief that three courses of action were open to us:

First. To remain where and as we are, and die not like a man with a disease, but like a wounded soldier whose lifeblood is ebbing away.

Second. To remove and revive; that is, to sell the church edifice, rebuild and reorganize at Chestnut Hill, in a rapidly growing neighborhood where a number of our people are already settled.

Third. To remain where we are, reconstruct our methods — social, financial, ritual and musical — and along new lines adapted to new needs continue to do the true work of a church of Christ.

I then stated publicly, as I have said privately, that for the second phase of the work I was better fitted than for the third; that if Shawmut Church, remaining on its old ground, were made a "free" or a "people's" or an "institutional church," there were others who could do the work better than I. Believing thoroughly in the idea of the family church and having trained myself to the work of the preacher, withal having been called to be the "pastor and teacher" of Shawmut Church, and imagining — whether rightly or wrongly — that miscellaneous entertainments and extraordinary inducements and allurements were to be part of the scheme of the reconstructed Shawmut Church, I intimated that the way would be clear for a new minister when the old Shawmut Church should dissolve.

Why did I say this, and how were the words understood? That I did not wish to preach the gospel to the poor, or to the people of moderate means, or that I wished to minister only to a special class?

No!

All my life record is against such an idea. To suggest it is to do me wrong. I could tomorrow preach to the poor

anywhere. I was for many months the pastor of a free mission church in New York City — the Knox Memorial Church on Ninth Avenue, above 38th Street, where I worked with interest and enjoyment among the tenement houses, winning the love of the people among whom I worked. In my nine years' service in the church at Schenectady, N.Y., I always stood for the spiritual equality of rich and poor, their equal representation in the Consistory and committees, their union in the work of the church and for hospitality in the pews. In all my preaching and pastoral work in Boston I have known no class, no distinction of rich and poor, and have urged the duties of hospitality upon pew-holders. Though I believe in pews, in a definite revenue for the church and in good business principles in carrying on a church organization and edifice, I believe still more in Christianity. The Master whom we serve gave it as proof of his Messiahship, "to the poor the gospel is preached."

In order that both motives and actions may be clear, and that I may be held responsible for no other word and deed than my own, allow me here to repeat the statement of certain principles with which I entered the ministry. These, which I have more than once uttered before you, were:

First. To stay *at least* five years in one pastorate — provided the people wanted me to do so — and to resist all worldly or other-worldly temptations to go elsewhere. This was in order that pastor and people should become well acquainted with each other for mutual service and highest efficiency.

Second. Never to interfere with the finances or the music. So long as there was an honest and capable business man in the congregation, and so long as precentor, choir, chorus, quartette or organist suited the people, I might attempt to influence by advice or teaching — never by authority.

Third. When a church member removed to such a distance from the church edifice that to reach it regularly would mean division of the family, great risk to health or practical violation of the Sabbath, I should invariably recommend his taking a letter of dismission to some Christian church in his neighborhood, in order that both the kingdom and the church of Christ should get the full benefit of his Christian life and character.

Fourth. Unless for special and sufficient reasons, there should be no traveling on the Lord's Day. I have never encouraged long and weary, or even short and needless trips on horse, electric or steam cars. In regard to this matter, and that of leaving the old and distant church and settling in the church of his neighborhood, and of traveling on the Sabbath, the conscience of each man is judge; but the minister must practice what he preaches, and encourage his people to do the same.

Fifth. In my ministry, with divine power helping human wisdom or tact, the average person should be made welcome both in the church — which is not made of brick or stone — and in the house of worship.

Sixth. That in whatever denomination of the Holy Catholic Church I was called to serve I should be thoroughly loyal to its polity and spirit. For I can preach the gospel in any denomination in which Christ is honored more than sect and the gospel is more than polity.

Trusting fully in the Congregational idea, and in practice of my principle, I hereby declare that the legal relation between pastor and people ceases from this moment. Whatever belongs to the peace and prosperity of Shawmut Church in the future, as far as pastor and people are concerned, will be arranged by mutual conference as between friends.

With the working principles I have thus repeated I began my ministry, and with them I came to this congregation in April, 1886. Let us now review the history of

Shawmut Church. Let us clear up any misapprehension that may exist, even in one mind; and as no root of bitterness has yet sprung up, see that none shall arise.

Shawmut Church may be said to have had its beginning in a prayer meeting held by some members of Pine Street Church in 1842. In 1845 in the chapel on Shawmut Avenue the church was gathered. In 1849 the Shawmut Congregational Society was incorporated and assumed its own self-support. In 1851 the new and handsome house of worship on Shawmut Avenue was built.

Then the South End was booming. Old mud swamps had been filled up, and on the tops of whole forests of trees driven head downwards splendid streets, parks and rows of beautiful houses sprang up as if by magic. Lovely homes, filled largely with young married people, multiplied. Men of energy, hope, culture and faith so crowded the South End that nearly a score of elegant churches were speedily built. The Shawmut edifice was outgrown in a few years, and a fresh and larger one, seating fourteen hundred people, demanded. With their handsome, stalwart and zealous young pastor, plenty of brain, money and energy behind them, and faith to lead on, all difficulties were surmounted. Despite the uncertainties of war time the Shawmut people built this superb meeting house; which, be it what it may on the outside, has no superior as an auditorium or as an edifice for social and religious use in Boston.

Then followed from the dedication of this, the third house of worship, June 17, 1864, a splendid career of material and spiritual prosperity. Then every pew and seat was taken, and those on the waiting list often counted the months by the dozen before their desire for a coveted seat was gratified. The great fire of 1872, involving a loss to Boston merchants of probably sixty millions of dollars, though it crippled many a fortune and business, seemed to have little effect upon the aggressive energy and abounding benevolence of Shawmut Church. Year after year of pros-

perity came and went. There were individual sorrows in your homes and in the pastor's home; but the church seemed to know none. For years, on the list of benevolent contributions, it led all the Congregational churches in Boston.

It was about the year 1882 or 1883 that the tide, having been for some time at flood, began to ebb, and the ominous list of members reckoned as "absent" began to lengthen. Soon the balance at the end of the year began to show instead of "net gain," first ciphers and then minus, until the report for 1885, balancing admissions to the church with deaths and dismissions, says, "net loss, twenty-five members."

What was the trouble? Those quick to find scapegoats began to talk of the need of "a younger man," and to suggest this remedy and that. Others looked beneath the surface, on which the straws floated, to the deep sea currents. The suburbs had been annexed to the city of Boston, and a marvelous scheme of easy and quick transportation had been inaugurated. The Back Bay district had been changed from mud, swamp and water first to alluring building lots, and then into homes and beautiful thoroughfares. Meanwhile along all the eastern line of streets at the South End the Catholics, Jews and a foreign population had gained lodgment. First the pastor noticed how the better sort of American families, pressed out by population of less congenial faith, and the young married folks who had yet their fortune to make, were moving out of the city to the suburbs. The Sunday school, first sensitive, showed the signs of change. Then began the exodus of whole families and clans to the regions of the Back Bay, Brookline, Newton, Dorchester and Jamaica Plain. In the year that Dr. Webb resigned (1885) it is said that twenty-five families left Shawmut Church, and in the two previous

years more than that number. In the one year, 1885, there was a loss of forty-three members, thirty-three of whom left for other churches.

Then came the question as to the best thing to do. Wise and far-seeing men who loved the old organization and wanted it to continue intact said even then, in 1885: "Sell the property and move into that part of the city where most of the Shawmut people are. Let us take time and opportunity by the forelock." The majority, however, thought differently, and the church voted that a new minister should be called.

Your servant in the providence of God, while innocently exchanging pulpits with a brother clergyman on Fifth Avenue, New York, was heard by a gentleman of New Jersey who was accidentally in New York. Having a friend in Shawmut Church this gentleman wrote to Boston. On Sunday, January 10, 1886, your servant, according to a fixed custom of personally welcoming all strangers whom he could lay his hands upon, met three visitors in the middle aisle of his church in Schenectady who said, in response to inquiry, that they were "from Massachusetts." It so eventuated, under Divine Providence, that a Congregational minister from the western end of this State entered a Reformed Church in Schenectady, and a Reformed Church pastor in the Empire State found himself in Boston.

I was installed April 18, 1886, and at once began to study the neighborhood. I soon came to this conclusion, that unless Shawmut Church people opened their pews and welcomed the stranger, the student, the boarder and the average person of the South End, and made this edifice practically though not technically free, the church could not live, but would quickly die.

I became familiar with every street in the neighborhood, from Dover to Northampton, and from Harrison to Huntington Avenue. I saw on the doors the thousand scars left by the removal of the old doorplates. I read the

new names and signs, but these were of meals and rooms, and shifted from the door to the window. At night I saw in each house the triple or quadruple lines of lighted windows which showed that the population had doubled and trebled. I noted that where the unit of the family and home had moved out, the unit of the multiplied individual had moved in. The day of the Sunday newspaper had also come, with picket lines of newsboys on the Lord's Day along the streets. The breakfast tables were set for late risers. Everything betokened alteration, indicating the peremptory necessity of change in church methods if the new population were to be kept Christian.

Yet despite the Sunday newspaper, the altered surroundings, the temptations for young people away from home to change the old ways of life for the worse, despite the spirit of heartless criticism and detraction which boarding-house life, as compared with home life, always fosters, I felt these people must be won into the church. In these boarding houses were students, ambitious young men and women, all eager for success in life. These strangers were not a low class, but a most interesting company. They were not yet satiated or cynical, but worthy of the church's best efforts, and able to make for the gospel preacher an almost ideal audience. I therefore, in connection with the help of the young people of the church, and by various personal efforts, endeavored to win them to regular attendance at one or more of the church services. I attempted, also, to have congregational singing — God worshiped less by proxy and more by the people — to select tunes which the people could sing, to strike a happy mean between Moody and Sankey and a too classic and artistic programme.

I was not successful in this, for the Shawmut people had their own ideas on the subject, being fixed in habit. Further, in my pastoral calls and invitations, I found the

changes rung upon this: "We are not able to rent pews, and we don't want to go where we may be considered intruders."

In a word there was necessity for a new spirit in Shawmut Church. I therefore at the first good opportunity brought up the subject in our Friday evening meetings, and had these matters discussed: How to make the downstairs entrance to the upstairs auditorium attractive on Sunday evenings; how to win the people to week-night services; and especially whether the church on Sunday evenings could not be made free, with the generally advertised invitation, "seats free, all invited."

I supposed that others saw the situation as I did, and that my propositions would be promptly and cheerfully accepted. But instead, the honorable committee, made up of some of the best men in Shawmut Church, after conference with the pew-owners and pew-holders, found that many persons expressed dislike or hostility to the free seat measure, intimating that if carried out they would give up their pews. When the committee brought in their report recommending that the pews at the Sunday evening services be free to all, the church on Friday evening, December 1, 1887, voted as follows (I quote from the record): "Discussion followed on the report, and it was voted inexpedient at present to throw the church open Sunday evening and make the pews free."

This was a greater blow to my plans and hopes than I can easily tell you; yet being the official vote of the church it did not seem wise to further agitate the matter, for the reforms which I had hoped for were on the matters of music and finance; and in these, according to a principle laid down on entering the ministry, I never interfere.

Further indications were not wanting, however, to prove that the matter of enlarging the hospitalities or of altering the fixed social type of the congregation was a very serious one. Indeed it was more serious than I had

imagined, or that many of the good men of Shawmut Church themselves had supposed. They wanted the church built up and the auditorium filled; but had honestly supposed that the regular church services, in which the people could take part, the preaching and the good music would fill the house, and that people would be willing to pay for what was provided. Get in the people; yes, but the people that would hire seats or rent the pews. This was the old-fashioned idea.

Still further, after the new pastor had been here somewhat over a year, and God had caused us to rejoice in seeing eighty-five persons added to the membership, when probably forty new families had made this church their home and the treasurer's schedule looked healthy, there came personal and direct discouragement from a few who have since left the church. They seemed to think the pastor and people of Shawmut Church were, even as it was, too hospitable to young people who were not yet famous or wealthy. Such critics of the pastor did not represent the true feelings of the Shawmut people. I did not argue the question with these critics. Had I done so, I could have said:

"Friends, do not ask me to make bricks without either straw or clay. The South End has changed. Instead of all homes and families, we have now boarding houses and many separate individuals. These young people now making their way in the world are just as much worthy of the gospel as those who once owned the houses in which the newcomers now board, and if the church does not welcome them, who will?"

As I have said, the spirit here manifested may have been typical of only a few individuals in the congregation.

To show you that I deal with dispassionate history rather than express personal feelings provoked by indviduals, I pass over other proofs that Shawmut Church was not so ready for radical reconstruction as some might lightly

imagine. Even men generous to a fault elsewise hoped to keep old Shawmut as she was. It was so much like a home, and they wanted to keep it so. I came back the third autumn, and the usual heart-chilling record of eight or ten families moved away had been faced. I had, half purposely, half accidentally (because the invitation looked so warm), left on the September programme the words used during the July and August vacation: "Seats free, all invited." On the third Sunday a gentleman — one of the most faithful, true and honest of Shawmut Church, the soul of honor, and whose presence was and is always helpful and inspiring — brought the programme to me, and said pleasantly but truthfully: "Dr. Griffis, this will not do; these seats are not free. This does not represent a fact; it will have to come off." It came off; it was seen no more. The words of my mentor — one of the oldest friends and stanchest supporters of Shawmut Church — were true. I simply took these incidents as the clinching of the nail, the riveting of the truth that Shawmut Church was not yet ready for radical changes in its methods or ideals, and that I must yield to the logic of facts.

How else could I interpret the signs, the indications and the official acts? I took them to mean that the Shawmut people stood for the idea of a family church; and so I considered that my work was to educate, to teach, to visit, to hold together, to be watchful and strengthen the things that remained. My own original purpose had been defeated. I thought for a stranger, coming from another place and denomination, I had done all I then could modestly or properly do. I accepted the situation.

In the face of adverse circumstances I should try to hold together the people of Shawmut Church until they were ready and willing to reorganize and reconstruct. So far as I could have influence, I should be in no hurry to kick the old lion or to desert the sinking ship. Further, I, with others, trusted that when the time came for old

Shawmut to die she should die decently, and prepay the expenses of her own funeral; and still further, that when the men of the new Shawmut should proceed to administer upon the estate they should find all debts paid, no hampering mortgages, and all clear for new work and a fresh career. The church's motto should be: "Owe no man anything but to love one another."

This was the purpose formed after earnest deliberation and prayer. Substantially people and pastor were agreed. Has the mutual contract been fulfilled? What is the story?

Let the answer be in figures. I am proud to read the record, and to show how grandly the old Shawmut men have faced adversity and met it. Let us look first at the society. I quote from the treasurer's own report. For the six years from January 1, 1880, to January 1, 1886, four of which years were among the grandest in Shawmut's history, the average amount of income and expenditure was $12,792, or a total of $76,751; almost all of which was, I believe, met by the income from the pews. From January 1, 1887, to January 1, 1892, the average amount raised was $12,294, or a total of $73,764.98. In other words the men of Shawmut Church, with their numbers reduced to practically one half, gave nearly as much as double the number of persons in the old days of prosperity. The men now here put their hands in their pockets and kept up the old, good name of Shawmut Church. True, indeed, it is that of the $73,000, $13,000 were obtained from the sale of the parsonage; but true, also, is it that of this money about $6,000 was used to pay old debts of long standing. True, also, is it that in the first year of the present pastorate nearly $8,000 were raised and expended on the rebuilding of Shawmut Chapel, and in refurnishing and renewing this edifice. True again is it that costly repairs to the church roof and brickwork and on the parsonage were paid for by some one in the church who never sent in a bill. Still further, in all these six years and more, no pastor of Shaw-

mut Church was ever more generously treated than the present one. To sum up as actual fact: In the six years from 1886 to 1892, against wind and tide, the old ship was kept afloat and the old flag flying; and now, without a barnacle on her sides or a rotten beam in her hull, she can be handed over to a new captain and crew for fresh voyages into the seas of the unknown future.

Let us now turn to the church and see what is her record in membership and benevolence. If you wish to verify the figures, which I have taken chiefly from the *Congregational Year-Books* from 1881 to 1892, you will be amused at a curious typographical error, and one which helps to explain why a devil is believed to assist the printer; and certainly printer's ink in the wrong place does work mischief. In one year it is stated, under the column of legacies received, that Shawmut Church had received a bequest of $79,000. Not even an exploring expedition led by a Stanley could find a dollar of this alleged bequest; but — alas for the pastor of Shawmut Church! — the news must have flown afar; for white brethren from the West and colored sisters from the South and the needy from the four points of the compass have come to his door to share the wealth which Shawmut had been alleged to inherit. Many came but few were chosen; and though you are always generous I have spared you from the beggars far more than you dream of.

In these statistics we find that for the six years previous to the beginning of the present pastorate (1881 to 1886) the average annual offerings amounted to $9,650; and that the nominal membership of the church from 1881 to 1886 was six hundred and thirty-three. Yet already the drift of population had so set in that on January 1, 1886, the net increase in membership, during these six years before the present pastorate, was only seventeen. In three of the years there was a net loss of thirty-one. Under the columns of families and absent members the figures are not

given; but the drift was alarming to those who saw it going on. When the present pastor began his work he found the total membership reported at six hundred and fifty-five. This, however, was merely nominal; for on beginning his pastoral visitation he sought out these people, but found that scores of them had removed from the city. When the *Manual* was issued in June, 1887, the list, partially revised and including the hundred or so new additions, gave a nominal total of six hundred and sixty-one; yet, as no such number was to be found in attendance in the church services or prayer meetings or even in the social gatherings, the pastor proposed that in reporting the annual statistics to the Suffolk West Conference we should reckon only those in actual attendance, and not include those who had practically left the church. The facts showed that instead of the six hundred and sixty-three on the list there were in reality only three hundred and twenty-eight members, of whom scores were attendants at Shawmut Chapel on Harrison Avenue.

In other words, when the present pastor was called here it was to a church of about three hundred actual members, and in the face of adverse currents. Even of those who have united with the church under the present ministration the majority have already removed from the neighborhood. While two hundred and fifty-one persons have united by letter or profession, two hundred and seventy-six died or were dismissed, making a net loss of twenty-five; so that the membership is a little less than in 1885. Nevertheless, with decreasing numbers our people have kept up their benevolence. I believe that in generosity the average member of Shawmut Church today excels the average member in the days of her prosperity.

A study of all the facts shows that the effort to hold together for labor and for sacrifice the faithful people of Shawmut Church has not been in vain. *God has enabled us to do what we tried to do.* Nobly have our people

held together; and today, with certain exceptions, the people who love Shawmut Church as the apple of their eye are just what and who they were in 1886. The lads have become men and the maidens women, hairs have whitened, homes have been invaded by sorrow and death, yet the old hearts beat warm. As one man's, and that man a lover, has been your heart to this church and to your pastor:

> A ruddy drop of manly blood
> The surging sea outweighs.
> The world, uncertain, comes and goes;
> The lover rooted stays.
> I fancied he was fled;
> And after many a year
> Glowed unexhausted kindliness,
> Like daily sunrise there. . . .
> Me too thy nobleness has taught
> To master my despair;
> The fountains of my hidden life
> Are through thy friendship fair.

So let us leave the history of the past with him who says, "I know thy works." Some of us had expected that the pierced hand that opens and shuts would show us a door of usefulness elsewhere in this city. There it had been my personal hope and wish that along the same lines as in the past, but with even more generous spirit, Shawmut Church might enter on a long and bright new day, and on a career that should mean more for the kingdom of heaven than even her glorious past. That door seems to be shut. For myself I cheerfully give way to look elsewhere for an open door.

Meanwhile, here on the old ground of past triumphs brave hearts full of faith see an open door. Let no man shut it. In the name of the Crucified and the Glorified, I bid you God speed. The door that was shut to me six years ago seems open to you now. Enter, and win the blessing. What you wish to do now I wished to do then.

Yet it is better that you have another leader. We do but follow the Master's thought of "new wine in new bottles." Let the noble corn of wheat ripened here not abide alone in its old shell, but let it die that it may bring forth more fruit.

The partings of friends are painful; but above us all is the "Friend that sticketh closer than a brother." Whatever Shawmut Church may decide to do, the prayers and hopes of your pastor will follow her, and in memory's golden perspective the seven years of service will seem to him "but a few days for the love he had for her."

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